

Profile



Paul H.T. Thorlakson

It is 15 years since Dr. Paul H.T. Thorlakson was elected a senior member of the CMA in recognition of his important contributions to medical education and research, to the development of group practice, to medicine in Manitoba, to the CMA, and to the community.

Born in 1895 in North Dakota, Paul Thorlakson was one of six children. His father, a Lutheran pastor, was originally from Iceland; his mother was Norwegian. His family moved to Selkirk, Man. in 1900. In September 1914 Paul entered Manitoba medical college. He volunteered for active military service in the Spring of 1916 but was returned from England, with other medical students in the services, in 1917, to complete his studies. He graduated in 1919. This was soon followed by postgraduate training in surgery in London, Eng. and in Europe. On his return he was invited by Dr. Neil John Maclean to become associated with him in his surgical practice. The Maclean-Thorlakson (Surgical) Clinic was formed in 1926.

During the next 12 years, Dr. Thorlakson developed his interest in the practice of group medicine. In 1938 he took the first positive step towards creating a multi-specialty clinic under the name Winnipeg Clinic. In 1942, the clinic moved into a two-storey building on the site of its present 12-floor structure. Today it is staffed by more than 60 doctors and 220 support personnel.

In academic medicine, he was first appointed to the staff of the faculty of medicine, University of Manitoba, in 1926, appointed professor of surgery in 1946, and emeritus professor of surgery in 1957. In part to enlarge and improve clinical teaching facilities, he organized the Manitoba Medical Centre as a designated area around the medical college. This was incorporated in 1945, and eventually evolved into the Health Sciences Centre in 1973.

Dr. Thorlakson was a member of the first associate committee on medical research of the National Research Council of Canada (now the Medical Research Council of Canada) from 1938 to 1946. His suggestion in March 1944 that a western regional group (of the associate committee) be established was accepted and Dr. Thorlakson became its first chairman. It marked a breakthrough in the development of medical research in western Canada.

In 1943 Dr. Thorlakson founded the Manitoba Institute for the Advancement of Medical Education and Research by transferring his ownership of the Winnipeg Clinic properties to the institute, thereby creating the nucleus of a charitable organization which would, in perpetuity, support research in the University of Manitoba's faculty of medicine. The present value is close to \$2 million.

Dr. Thorlakson became a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada in 1931

and of the American Surgical Association in 1941. He was president of the National Cancer Institute of Canada from 1951 to 1952; governor of the American College of Surgeons from 1955 to 1958; and was made an honorary fellow of the International College of Surgeons in 1968. He also holds honorary degrees from the University of Iceland and the three universities in Manitoba, and is a companion of the Order of Canada.

In 1962, Dr. Thorlakson prepared a brief on group practice for the Royal Commission on Health Services, and wrote the foreword to the CMA's 1967 publication "Group Practice in Canada".

Dr. Thorlakson organized the First International Congress on Group Medicine, which met in Winnipeg in 1970. Delegates came from 21 countries. He has maintained his active interest in the succeeding triennial congresses held in Rio de Janeiro, Paris, Berlin and Tokyo. The 6th congress will be held in Dallas, Texas in 1985.

During the 1950s Dr. Thorlakson chaired a fund-raising committee to establish a chair of Icelandic language and literature at the University of Manitoba, and in 1974 was Canada's official representative at the celebrations marking the 1100th anniversary of the settlement of Iceland. He was the highly respected chancellor of the University of Winnipeg from 1969 to 1978.

Dr. Thorlakson and his wife Gladys, who loyally supported all his endeavours; are held in much affection. Their twin sons, Kenneth and Robert (both surgeons) and their daughter, Tannis Richardson, all live in Winnipeg.

Dr. Thorlakson continues to actively participate in both medical and other projects in which he is interested. ■

Charlotte Gray